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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/IPA; NSC FOR  
ABRAMS/DANIN

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KWBG](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: HAMAS READY TO EXTEND TRUCE, PA MINISTER CLAIMS

REF: TEL AVIV 4401

Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Jeffrey Feltman, per 1.5 (b) and (d).

(U) This cable has been cleared with Embassy Tel Aviv.

SUMMARY

1. (C) Following up on his conversation with Embassy PolOff last week (reftel), PA Minister of Culture Ziad Abu-Amr, in a meeting with A/PO in Ramallah on 8/4, said that Hamas leaders would tell PA Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas in Gaza this week that they are prepared to extend the cease-fire for an additional three months. During that time, Abu-Amr insisted, the PA must move decisively toward municipal elections as a way to channel Hamas' "energy" into a permanent buy-in to the PA's political program, including negotiations for a two-state solution. Hamas is ready, Abu-Amr argued, and may even be ready to participate in PA elections (which would symbolize belated acceptance of the Oslo political landscape). Bringing Hamas on board without a major confrontation is not appeasement but realism, Abu-Amr insisted: the PA might very well lose an outright fight and, even if the PA largely prevailed, the result of a confrontation might be splinter cells that are impossible to root out. It is far better to capitalize upon what he described as the extreme internal discipline of Hamas (which he compared favorably with the unruly nature of Fatah) to end the violence once and for all through an internal political process that includes Hamas. If the cease-fire unravels, he predicted, it will be due to a process started by Al-Aqsa and/or Israeli actions, not something Hamas starts. End summary.

HAMAS TO TELL ABU MAZEN  
"YES" ON EXTENDING CEASE-FIRE

2. (C) In his high-rise Ramallah office overlooking the ruins of the Muqatta'a, Abu-Amr continued his conversation begun the previous week with Embassy PolOff on the PA-Hamas dialogue (reftel). Hamas leaders, he predicted, will tell Abbas in Gaza this week that they are prepared to extend the cease-fire ("hudna" was the word Abu-Amr used throughout the conversation) for an additional three months. Hamas leaders, keenly monitoring popular reactions, sense that the Palestinian population at this point largely supports the cease-fire; moreover, the Hamas external leadership is still feeling the pressure of U.S. demands on Syria. Thus it has not been all that difficult, Abu-Amr claimed, to persuade them to extend the cease-fire.

DANGER TO CEASE-FIRE NOT  
(IN FIRST INSTANCE) FROM HAMAS

3. (C) As he had last week, Abu-Amr dismissed concerns that Hamas or rogue elements thereof might unilaterally start actions that break the cease-fire. Citing the "extreme discipline" of Hamas, Abu-Amr expressed far more worry about

unilateral Israeli moves or Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade attacks that could invite Israeli retaliation that would cause the cease-fire to unravel. Abu-Amr referred with worry to the Al-Aqsa-claimed firing that wounded four people near Gilo the previous night. While Palestinian disappointment over what they perceive as the inadequate Israeli positive response to the drop in violence and threats "seriously weakens" the commitment to the cease-fire, Hamas, he insisted, will not be the ones to endanger the cease-fire.

HAMAS LEADERS MORE MODERATE  
THAN THE STREET  
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14. (C) At the same time, Hamas will not be able to extend the cease-fire indefinitely without something to show for it.

The considerable "energy" that has been focused over the past few years in "waging the Intifada" must be channeled elsewhere. Hamas leaders in Gaza are "more moderate" than their young followers, Abu-Amr insisted, and are ready to turn the movement toward what the PA would consider more constructive and more acceptable activities. (Abu-Amr claimed that the fiery Abdulaziz Rantissi was the exception to his claim that the Gaza leadership was more moderate. Rantissi's "problem," he said, is personal, in that he bears severe grudges against the "humiliations" he suffered at the hands of Mohammed Dahlan's forces in 1996, when Dahlan had Rantissi shaved and jailed.) In this, the "more moderate" Hamas leaders are assisted by the Hamas prisoners in Israel, whose prison experience has generally given them a "more sophisticated, less radical" understanding of their political horizons. (Abu-Amr digressed at this point to a "law of diminishing returns" regarding the prisoners -- that, having gone through a period of moderation, they risked becoming radicalized if Israel continued to stall on prisoner releases, doing only small numbers begrudgingly.)

CHANNELING HAMAS  
ENERGY TO ELECTIONS  
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15. (C) Abu-Amr speculated that, before the expiry of the second three-month cease-fire, the PA must be in the midst of serious preparations for "rolling" municipal elections. Elections, rather than the conflict with Israel, would then become the focus for Hamas and other groups. Everyone's attention, he predicted, would be on the local races, rather than on Israeli action. A/PO asked what sort of standard the PA would insist upon as the price for Hamas' admission to the elections, commenting that the PA should not entertain the thought of allowing participation in elections by any group that maintained illegal military wing and considered violence an acceptable political tool.

HAMAS MUST BUY ON TO PROGRAM  
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16. (C) Abu-Amr agreed that Hamas must subscribe to the basic parameters of the PA and PLO program, which he articulated as renunciation of violence, acceptance of a two-state solution and Israel's right to exist in peace and security, and resolution of the conflict through negotiations. Abu-Amr claimed that the Hamas leaders are already "more or less" committed to these ideas but need to have a political excuse, cover and incentive -- which elections would provide -- to be more explicit on these points. It is good, Abu-Amr said, that Islam as an ideology is flexible -- one can find justification for fighting, and one can find justification for ending the physical fight in favor of political fights. "The doctrine is hospital to change." A/PO asked whether the PA would insist on written commitments to this effect by any candidates or groups that would choose to participate in the elections, but Abu-Amr, avoiding a direct answer, responded that all would be decided as preparations for local elections geared up. A/PO reiterated the point that Hamas would never be accepted by the U.S. and Israel as a legitimate political faction as long as it maintained its military wing and left open the

possibility of returning to violence.

#### HAMAS READY FOR PA ELECTIONS, TOO?

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17. (C) Musing about how he has witnessed the evolution in thinking by the local Hamas leaders, Abu-Amr speculated that, once conditions are right for PA legislative and presidential elections, Hamas would also want to field candidates in those races. This is a revolution in Hamas thinking, he argued. Before, Hamas leaders always left open the idea of participating for local or "national" (PLO-wide) office, but they clearly rejected any PLC elections that might bless what Hamas viewed as an illegitimate Oslo-based institution. By hinting that they would field Hamas candidates in PLC races, Hamas leaders are again underscoring their acceptance of the Oslo political landscape including a negotiated settlement with Israel. Abu-Amr also noted, however, the "impossibility" of legislative elections in the current period. He cited two roadblocks: the Israeli occupation of most West Bank cities, and the U.S. hostility to PA presidential elections (as long as Arafat would emerge as a viable candidate) which the Palestinians would insist accompany any legislative elections.

#### TRYING TO CAPITALIZE ON HAMAS DISCIPLINE

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18. (C) When A/PO cautioned Abu-Amr that the PA must be very careful not to encourage a process that would in effect extend a lifeline to terrorist groups that must be fought, Abu-Amr responded that co-opting the majority of Hamas members through elections was "not appeasement." If the PA launched a frontal battle against Hamas now, he said, "we would lose." Even if, with time, the PA would prevail in an outright military confrontation, "we would create a thousand splinter groups," individual cells that would step up attacks on the PA and -- especially -- on Israel, since Israel would, "based on its behavior over the past three years," pound the PA in retaliation to what Hamas was doing. The plethora of "splinter groups" would be impossible to root out. Abu-Amr described this scenario as a "lose-lose" proposition.

19. (C) What he is proposing, Abu-Amr said, is a "pragmatic, realistic" approach: use the best quality of Hamas, its internal discipline, to end the violence definitively in favor of a political approach. If elections can induce the Hamas leadership to echo Abu Mazen's message that the armed Intifada is over, then the majority of the Hamas cadres would be on board. It would be relatively easy for the PA to crush those elements that do not go along with the Hamas leadership, since the numbers would be relatively few, he predicted, and because they would be defying the wishes of the collective Palestinian leadership.

#### CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF THIS SCENARIO: ISRAELI ACTION AND MOVEMENT ON REFORM

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10. (C) Abu-Amr closed by saying that his relatively rosy scenario assumed two things: that Israel would take steps forward, even if more slowly than the Palestinians would like, that strengthened the PA, and that the PA itself proceeds as quickly as possible with its domestic reform program. Both of those elements would bring credibility to the Abu Mazen government, he said, and would illustrate to the population the benefits of Abu Mazen's policies. If Israeli steps or Palestinian reform stall completely -- and he criticized both for not moving quickly enough -- then he was worried that his scenario for co-opting Hamas through elections might not work as well as he had just outlined. For that reason, he said, he has become a "real nag" in PA cabinet meetings about the need to move forward on reforms other than in the financial area, "the only sector where our record is excellent."

